

15/11/1997

## The return of the Vision Squad

MY last column ('Back to the Future', Nov 1) contained a few paragraphs in which I advanced the provocative thesis that we're not quite on course in achieving some of the noble aims of Vision 2020.

Readers, from the mighty to the holy, sent messages which all basically said: "Amir, what a provocative thesis that was. Such a shame that the mean-spirited editors only gave you a few measly paragraphs. Tell us more!"

Well, I'm usually chuffed to fulfil any requests from the public, but I didn't want to get into trouble by going all the way. What if I was branded a huge threat to national security and sent on an unpaid holiday to Kamunting?

So I procrastinated, pontificated, prevaricated and did a few other long words that start with P. But then I was saved - and it was a new Malaysian book, of all things, that took care of my dilemma.

The book is *In Liberal Doses* and it's by one of our more interesting columnists, Marina Mahathir. I'll leave an analysis of the book's contents to the eventual reviewer, but I just want to say a few words about the foreword. It was penned by our Prime Minister, who'd taken some time off from his battle against foreigners continually and maddeningly jealous of our success.

He said that critics are absolutely necessary for our nation to progress further. I took this as an encouraging sign not only for Marina but for myself, since I too am an impressively coiffured social critic whose last name begins with M.

So I will now focus, without fear or favour, on three recent things that disturbed me since they seem to violate some of the adjectives used in our Vision of a utopian society - that is, psychologically liberated, secure, self confident, mature, democratic, scientific, progressive, liberal and tolerant.

On Nov 5, the Education Minister confirmed that academics are barred from talking to the media on the Malaysian environment, specifically the haze. I hope that I am not the only person to find this somewhat weird. It contradicts quite a few of the marvellous adjectives laid out above.

Academics, just like politicians, have opinions and want a bit of glamour by being quoted in newspapers. We are after all fully cognisant of our politicians' opinions on everything from lipstick and social ills to the aphrodisiacal properties of coconut water. This is well and good.

But why withhold from academics and scientists, who after all have pieces of paper which testify to their competence in some relevant field, a similar opportunity to blab and bleat?

The official excuse is that the media (foreign and local) are simply itching to offer dangerously apocalyptic diagnoses for the health of our nation. This would be bad for tourism and might affect the morale of Commonwealth Games athletes.

Although there's always the risk of comments being twisted out of all recognisable shape and context by sensationalistic reporters, methinks it would be more "psychologically liberated" to counter sloppy research with better research.

This matter's particularly urgent because we will be sending fewer students abroad from now on, as it makes greater economic sense for them to study here. If we keep pushing our academics around, this might hurt

their self-esteem, the poor loves, and they'll consequently have less of the stuff to pass on to their students. So I don't quite approve of the gag order.

The ultimate gag order in any society would of course be the death penalty. Somewhere below that is another punishment which can make any dutiful citizen promptly pee in his pants. Or, as Kam Raslan puts it in a forthcoming book called *Generation: A Collection of Contemporary Malaysian Ideas*: "ISA. Three little letters that can send shivers down the spine of any middle-class Malaysian."

From Nov 3 to 8, 10 people were detained without trial under the Internal Security Act for being associated with the Shi'ite sect. The reasons given: they're considered a threat to Muslim unity, they might get violent, and they oppose our democratic Constitution.

Various NGO types came out against this measure. Some said that it's not illegal for a Malaysian Muslim to follow Shi'ite teachings rather than the majority Sunnah ways. Others point out that if they're truly deviationist, they should just be tried in the Syariah Court or under the Sedition Act.

Malaysia is a land of many ironies, and this is one: We punish people for being "against democracy" by using ... the ISA, not exactly the most democratic of instruments.

These are sensitive and treacherous waters we're treading here ... simply because we've been taught to be careful on all "sensitive" issues like religion and politics. I don't disagree with this.

But a glance at some far-away foreign regimes will show that repressive measures are sometimes undertaken not with the noblest of intentions. Rather, they're occasionally a way to distract the public from the greater problems in a society. Just look at the grim scenarios behind the former Iron Curtain. (But that's in the past, so we're all right now).

From the hardships of erstwhile Communism we glide effortlessly to the glories of consumerist Capitalism, a land of opportunities, wonder and ... endless, multi-channel TV.

I've been hearing vague and troubling rumours about the News and Current Affairs Division of a certain TV station. It seems that the Division is - or is about to be - disbanded because a few feathers were ruffled during a news broadcast on the currency crisis.

Is this true? I called a few employees but they all, for some reason, refused to be quoted on anything. So I'm left with little more than an urban myth. But don't myths sometimes contain an iota of a germ of a scintilla of a mote of truth?

Even if it isn't literally true, the fact that people choose to believe it (without expressing surprise or bewilderment) says something about our collective psyche. Some of us are becoming terrible cynics, which I'm told is not good for the complexion. Far better to have the rosy bloom of naivete.

What I do know is that guests on the station's talk radio shows are shown a large sign which lists all the things that they aren't allowed to touch on, including the haze, religion, politics and the economy.

This is a pity, not to mention immature, undemocratic, unprogressive, illiberal and intolerant. So much talk ... and so little to say.

I used to envy DJs since they get to meet pop stars and always seem to be bursting with energy. But now I'm not so sure. They obviously have to reckon with stricter censorship that I do; I mean, they can't even say Bitch when introducing the Meredith Brooks song! Here's another irony: This station initially signalled a greater openness in our society - in line of course with the salubrious aims of Vision 2020. But now the effect is more akin to (in the words of another essay from *Generation*) "opening up more and more windows only to find that there's still not enough air to

go around". Who knew?

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